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Municipal Airport Developed Over Period of 31 Years

Aviation began in the valley in 1926 with an army surplus biplane and several enthusiastic men who had the foresight to realize the future for flying.

The first airport here was nothing more than a meadow west of the present Fort Smith Stockyard. Two Fort Smith men, Ollie Blan & Clarence Owensby, Jr. formed a partnership and bought the plane in August 1926. The late Leigh Kelley permitted the two flyers to use his field in the Moffett bottoms for landings and take offs.

In 1927, Blan and Owensby moved their airport to another field just west of South Fort Smith. Shortly after that ten local men pooled their resources and bought an "American Eagle" plane in Kansas City. They returned to Fort Smith with the plane and operated it from the Moffett field as the Ozark Airlines, Inc. The field was known as "Alexander Field."

About 1929 the two flying companies merged and Blan returned to the Moffett field where he became manager. In 1932, the Moffett airport was bought by Floyd Muncie.

The first recorded commercial airline to operate in the Fort Smith area began service to Alexander in 1931. Service lasted until the field was resold. Staff of the first airline included Dr. L. M. Hunter, president, Ellsi Fagan, chief pilot and operating manager, and Bill Berry, now airport manager at Stuttgart.

In 1936 and 1937, Leigh Kelley, Rudd Ross and some others conceived the idea of a municipal airport. An airport advisory committee was appointed and 320 acres was set aside for a municipal airport. The land included the western portion of the present Fort Smith Municipal Airport southeast of the city. When land was purchased, the Moffett field was abandoned. Ross, Kelly and Tom Harper were on the airport advisory committee.

The airport hanger was constructed in 1941 by WPA labor as the airport grounds were developed. Sod landing strips were provided for Fort Smith air traffic at the first official Fort Smith airport.

"There have been as many as eight or ten planes on the field at that time" says Bob Crisp, present airport manager. He said landing strips were marked and drained, although they remained sodded for several years.

In 1944 and 1945, two airlines, Braniff and Mid Continent---proposed to the city that they would begin service here if runways were improved and a terminal were constructed.

By early 1945 crews were busy building two asphalt runways 100 feet wide and 3,500 feet long. Airport operations were directed by the Fort Smith Airport association, a city organization responsible for the airport and its management.

Arkansas Valley aviation history was recorded in September of 1945 as Braniff and Mid Continent began permanent air service here.

In 1947 a \$1,500,000 program added land and runway space to the air traffic facilities. The U.S. Federal Airport Aid act provided \$750,000 for improvements at the local airport. This sum was

matched by an equal amount raised by the city through a bond issue.

The 1947 additions provided total runway facilities of a north-south runway 4,115 feet long and an east-west runway 4,600 feet long. Both strips were 150 feet wide and the additions were completed in early 1949.

In early 1948, the airport association was dissolved and the manager system was adopted. Jack McDowell was the manager until 1948. He had been preceded by Penn Wilson, who worked under the supervision of the airport association.

Crisp came to the local airport as manager in September of 1948. When the association was dissolved, the airport fell under the authority of the Public Works commissioner.

A 1950 addition extended the east-west runway to a total length of 5,300 feet. Airlines increased their traffic here and more flights were added. Shortly after the service was increased, Braniff and Mid Continent merged. The same flights were maintained, however.

Braniff provided east-west routes in the original airline schedule here. Service was provided from Memphis to Tulsa and Oklahoma City with stops at Little Rock, Fort Smith and Muskogee. North-south traffic was provided by Mid Continent. The route began at Kansas City and continued to New Orleans. Stops included Joplin, Fort Smith, Texarkana and Shreveport.

In 1954 Central Airlines begin service here, also. Fort Smith; Paris, Texas; Dallas and Fort Worth were included on the first Central schedule. A schedule including Fort Smith, Fayetteville, and St. Louis has now been added with service added at Harrison recently.

More than 3,000 passengers board planes at the airport each month. At least that many step off of planes here also. Traffic figures have jumped considerably compared to the approximately 500 who traveled on airliners each month when the service was first established here.

There are 18 city employees at the airport now. Nearly 100 are employed in the various offices and the Air National Guard base nearby. Charter service is available through facilities of Skyways Airlines and the Fort Smith Flying Service.

The city does not own any planes at the municipal field.

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